



Quick Facts: The Landscape of Early Learning and Care Programs Serving Dual Language Learners in California

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This brief presents a snapshot of early learning and care programs serving dual language learners (DLLs) across California. DLLs, defined as children who are learning another language in addition to English, make up 60% of the state’s children ages birth to 5 years.¹ The following findings are from a survey of a representative sample of early learning program administrators in 16 California counties, conducted as part of the First 5 California DLL Pilot Study.²

Where are DLLs enrolled in early learning and care?

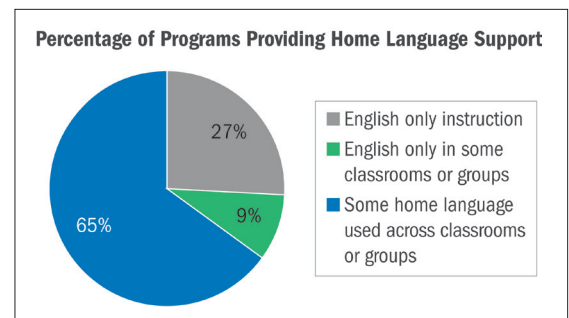
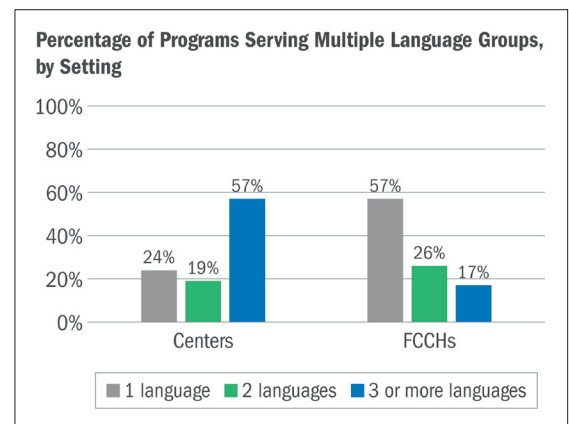
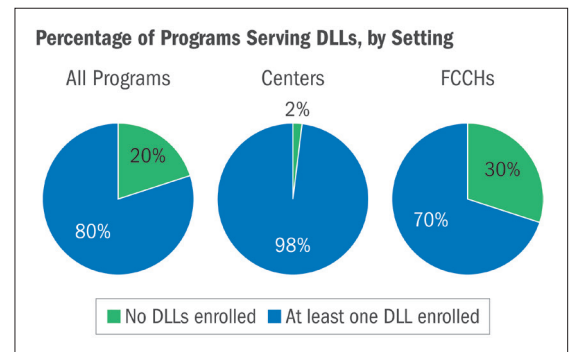
Nearly all centers and the majority of family child care homes in California serve DLLs. Across the state, 98% of licensed center-based programs and 70% of licensed family child care homes (FCCHs) served at least one DLL in 2019. Among centers that serve DLLs, most are preschool programs (54%) or serve both preschool and infant/toddler programs (43%). Most FCCHs that enroll DLLs serve both age groups (74%) or only infants and toddlers (17%), similar to patterns seen for all children regardless of DLL status.

The concentration of DLLs in early learning programs varies widely. DLLs often attend programs with many other DLLs, but sometimes they do not. The average DLL program serves 53% DLLs. About one in three (34%) programs has low concentrations of DLLs (less than 30% of their enrollment). However, FCCHs tend to have larger concentrations of DLLs than centers; on average, 60% of children enrolled in FCCHs are DLLs, compared with 42% in centers.

Many early learning programs in California serve a linguistically diverse population of children. The majority of DLL-serving centers (57%) serve children representing three or more languages, whereas FCCHs are more likely to serve DLLs who all speak the same language. Spanish is spoken by at least one child at 87% of DLL-serving programs, but only 38% of programs (23% of centers and 49% of FCCHs) serve Spanish speakers exclusively. After Spanish, the most commonly spoken languages in early learning programs are Mandarin (24% of programs have at least one Mandarin speaker) and Pilipino/Tagalog (19%).³

What language approach is used to support DLLs?

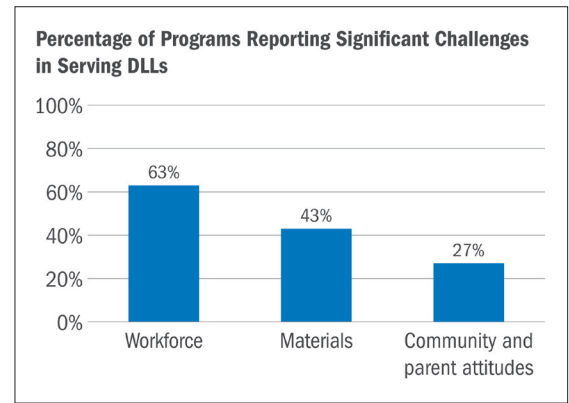
While the majority of DLL-serving programs offer some type of home language support, more than one in four reported using no home language for instruction. Administrators from many programs reported using children’s home languages—sometimes through intentional dual language models, sometimes more informally. Using a child’s home language is important for developing fluency in that language as well as for building cultural identity and supporting English language acquisition.^{4,5} However, administrators at 27% of DLL-serving programs reported using only English instruction in their programs, and another 9% reported using English only instruction in some of their classrooms.⁶ A similar proportion of centers and FCCHs reported using English only instruction.



Note: Does not add to 100% due to rounding.

What challenges did site administrators report in serving DLLs?

Results from the survey suggest that the early learning and care workforce in California may not be prepared to support DLLs effectively. A majority of programs (63%) reported at least one significant challenge related to workforce, such as not having enough teachers trained to work with DLLs or to engage with their families, or not having enough funding for professional development. In addition, more than 40% of center and FCCH administrators reported facing significant challenges related to the availability or adequacy of bilingual materials. Beliefs and attitudes about bilingualism held by parents or the larger community were less challenging; 27% of programs reported that these beliefs and attitudes (such as community attitudes about DLLs or parents' preferences to have their children learn English) were a significant challenge for them in serving DLLs in their programs. Centers and FCCHs reported similar significant challenges.



CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The early learning and care system has historically been underfunded, and COVID-19 has compounded that challenge. In a survey of a representative sample of California's early learning program directors conducted in July 2020 for a separate study, more than two thirds (68%) reported that the financial stability of their programs was a moderate or major challenge during the pandemic.⁷ In addition, 58% reported laying off or furloughing staff as a result of COVID-19 disruptions, and 36% had to reduce staff pay (with many more FCCHs—64%—than centers—10%—having to reduce pay).

A further strain on the system has been the closure of sites and the new group size requirements due to public health concerns. More than one third of programs (35%) reported that they were closed for in-person care, and 16% of those programs noted that they were not at all or only slightly likely to reopen. DLLs are disproportionately affected by these program closures and reduced enrollment among open programs; as a result of these changes in availability, an estimated 81% of California's DLLs are no longer receiving care at the programs in which they were enrolled in March 2020, compared with 73% of non-DLLs.

Summary and Implications

As California recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and the early learning and care system rebuilds, it will be critical to understand the context and challenges programs serving DLLs faced both before and during the crisis. Many programs serving DLLs have multiple languages represented at their sites, and one in three have low concentrations of DLLs, making the incorporation of children's home languages more difficult. More than one quarter of administrators of DLL-serving programs reported using only English for instruction, a finding possibly related to challenges that programs experience in recruiting trained, bilingual staff. In addition to workforce issues, site administrators expressed concerns about providing DLLs with high-quality bilingual resources. These challenges are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic, especially given the financial concerns after closures and restrictions as a result of COVID-19. In the near term, some licensed programs reported that they may be unable to reopen,⁸ and with fewer center-based slots available in the immediate future, displaced DLLs may be more likely to receive care through informal family, friend, or neighbor care arrangements. As the system recovers, more attention should be given to building the capacity of these informal care providers to support DLLs, without losing sight of the resources that licensed early learning programs continue to need⁹ to support this large and important population of the state's children.

This work was funded by First 5 California as a part of the Dual Language Learner Pilot Study.

¹ Holtby, S., Lordi, N., Park, R., & Ponce, N. A. (2017). Families with young children in California: Findings from the California Health Interview Survey, 2011–2014. *American Journal of Medical Research*, 4(2), 168–178.

² The survey was conducted between April 2019 and April 2020. It was administered in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Russian. The survey response rate was 74%, with a total sample size of 744.

³ Early learning program administrators reported serving more than 50 different languages. The top 10 languages in order of prevalence were Spanish, Mandarin, Pilipino/Tagalog, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Korean, Hmong, Russian, and Hindi.

⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>

⁵ Halle, T. G., Whittaker, J. V., Zepeda, M., Rothenberg, L., Anderson, R., Daneri, P., . . . Buysse, V. (2014). The social-emotional development of dual language learners: Looking back at existing research and moving forward with purpose. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29(4), 734–749.

⁶ A forthcoming brief on sites' language approaches and priorities will provide more information on language models. See <https://californiadllstudy.org/index.php/> for all study publications.

⁷ Quick, H., White, L., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., Bergey, R., & Carbucaia-Abbott, M. (2020). *A system in jeopardy: California's early learning system and its dual language learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*. San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/covid-early-learning>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zepeda, M., Crolotte, C., Doh, J., & Harris, V. R. (2020). *The dual language learner policy platform: Informing California's early learning and care policies and investments in 2020–21 and beyond*. Los Angeles, CA, and Oakland, CA: Advancement Project California and Early Edge California. https://earlyedgecalifornia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/DLL-Policy-Platform_Final-Report.pdf